



Commercial Agriculture
and the Politics of

Peasant Communities

An

in El Salvador, 1823–1914

AGRARIAN
REPUBLIC

Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago

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AN AGRARIAN REPUBLIC



1 Introduction

PEASANTS IN THE AGRARIAN HISTORY OF EL SALVADOR

Over the last two decades, El Salvador's political changes, which include a revolutionary civil war and a transition to civilian rule, have drawn attention to the country's earlier history. Important aspects of recent history have been linked to the changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By focusing on land use, export production, and rural class and ethnic relations, this study traces the history of what are considered causal factors in the development of El Salvador's highly stratified and politically conflicted society. Its conclusions may add to our understanding of land use, peasant communities, and politics in other regions of Latin America as well. My research brings together three important literatures in the study of Latin American history. First, it draws on the study of post-colonial agrarian society, including questions of land tenure, labor, and agriculture. Second, it addresses peasant politics and state formation during the nineteenth century. Finally, it contributes to debates on the impact of coffee production on class structure and state power in Latin America. I hope that this book will help insert Salvadoran historiography in a wider Latin American context and end its relative isolation.

Latin America's Nineteenth-Century Agrarian History

Between the 1950s and early 1980s, the study of Latin American history was framed by theories that emphasized macroeconomic issues, such as developmentalist, dependency, Marxian, and world-system models. These theories stressed Latin America's connections with northern or global economic forces as the key to the region's internal development. Prompted in part by the excesses of these often schematic, rigid, and bipolar models, more recent scholars have incorporated a greater mass of empirical research on local and regional history into their studies.¹ Since the mid-1980s historians have begun to test the ideas proposed by these theories and connect them to the lives and stories of identifiable people.² In the process, many have discovered that rural Latin America—especially regions affected by the expansion of export agriculture—was more complex and diverse than originally thought.³ Recent studies have focused on peasant forms of resistance and adaptation to the impositions and exactions of states and elite groups, emphasizing the experiences and autonomy of subaltern social sectors. This new literature reformulates and reinterprets the effects of long-term, large-scale structural forces in a way more consistent with the heterogeneity of local and regional social history.

This study examines the history of the Salvadoran peasantry, but within the context of processes traditionally perceived as external to the peasantry (agro-exports, state formation, elite political culture). The arguments presented here attempt to compensate for biases in Central American historiography that emphasize elites and global linkages but discount the popular sectors. While acknowledging the diverse responses of peasants to markets, state impositions, and social and political conflict, most historical studies of Central America reflect an emphasis on the dominance of export agriculture and state-based transitions. This literature sees export agriculture as the engine driving the formation of agrarian social relations and political regimes. The export economies that emerged between 1860 and 1929 are usually seen as a negative force, destroying more egalitarian, precapitalist social relations. As a result, discussions of El Salvador's agrarian history have remained top-down, reductionist, and functionalist—and often not backed up by careful study of peasant communities and social structures—emphasizing instead a

“development of [export] capitalism” model.⁴ Many continue to associate peasants’ participation in markets and commercial economies—especially for export—with the dispossession of their lands. “Liberal” privatization—especially in Central America—also continues to be understood mostly as an expression of oligarchic power in which a hovering state, controlled or manipulated by the agro-export elite, tears away the subsistence rights of peasants. My research suggests that the results of peasant commercial participation are more complex and open-ended than these assumptions would have us believe.

This study also seeks to integrate the study of Salvadoran history with recent approaches to politics and the state that focus on peasants’ political activities and their involvement in forming the nation-state.⁵ In this literature, peasants are posited as integral to the polity, involved in their own struggles over the definition and practice of politics, even creating their own forms of nationalism and national identity, especially between 1820 and 1870. But many historians have turned to popular and peasant culture, nationalism, and politics without fully understanding the underlying structures of the peasant political economy that provided the foundations for collective political mobilization. Many have ignored the political and social impact of changes in peasants’ social structure and landowning patterns. While most current studies of peasant politics in nineteenth-century Latin America are framed by the dilemmas of weak, emerging, and conflicted states—problems often exacerbated by foreign invasion, regional conflict, or civil war—important issues such as land tenure, land legislation, how peasant communities actually functioned, and the effects of regional and export markets on these processes are often not integrated into discussions of peasant political mobilization. This inquiry aims to place Salvadoran history within these debates and to advance some questions that might help link these theories to future discussions of nineteenth-century peasants and politics in Latin America.

Reconceptualizing El Salvador’s Agrarian Historiography

The revolutionary movements and wars of the late 1970s and 1980s generated a growing interest in Central American history and a demand for new research into the region’s past. The successes of revolutionary

movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala drew particular attention to the region's agrarian history and to the social and historical roots of authoritarian politics; however, little empirical research was done, in part precisely because of the difficulties of carrying out research in war-torn societies.⁶ Partially influenced by the ideological polarization of the crises of the late 1970s, scholars emphasized the all-encompassing power of elites over Central American societies. With the emergence of El Salvador's political crisis and revolutionary war after 1980, observers sought the historical sources of the country's social structure and political system, often tracing the origins of mid-twentieth-century elite dominance and authoritarian politics to the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, this meant projecting post-1950 agrarian patterns onto earlier periods. Scholars assumed that the more recent social structure—the dominant landholding oligarchy and landless workers of the 1970s—also existed in the past. This fallacy led to often mythical or romanticized visions of the country's history. El Salvador has remained, both in academic and popular conceptions, a country persistently torn by extremes in the distribution of wealth and power, suffering from large, elite-owned plantations that expropriated and concentrated land and coerced labor, and dominated by authoritarian regimes typically unresponsive to popular pressures or needs that existing only within an “empty shell” of constitutional liberalism.

When dependency theories were at the height of their popularity, much of the blame was placed on the country's linkage to world markets and its reliance on coffee production. Coffee cultivation was usually presented as a homogenizing force controlled by a small oligarchic elite with nearly absolute social power as well as direct control of the state. This has contributed to a highly teleological understanding of the country's history. All that came before was nothing but a prelude to what came after—what followed was nothing but the logical conclusion of a series of originating structures and patterns. Coffee in particular is often presented as the great dividing line—a force that entirely revolutionized or dissolved every agrarian pattern that preceded it.

All this rests on a very narrow empirical base. David Browning's book on Salvadoran land use is cited more often than any other to support this perspective, even though it also suggests that El Salvador did not make the transition to an economy centered on coffee and dominated

by an oligarchy until the 1920s. Browning cites evidence from the pre-1900 period that indicates a great diversity in land use patterns. He acknowledges—without specifying a precise time frame—that most coffee cultivation was done by small growers, and that coffee production did not displace other economic activities. But Browning, who relies almost completely on the government's *Diario Oficial* rather than local archival sources, never reconciles his discussion of these trends with more prominent (and often quoted) passages in which he presents coffee and the development of a landholding elite as the key to the period's history. By the late 1870s, Browning suggests, the state was involved in promoting export agriculture, and state leaders realized that the communities and villages could not respond quickly to the opportunities offered by coffee production, a process from which “the majority of the population were excluded.”⁷

Browning and others have also assumed that the special requirements of coffee production could be met quickly only on larger plantations with permanent plantings, ready capital, and a massive labor force during the picking season. Furthermore, the elite, assumed to be in firm control of the state, decreed the destruction and appropriation of peasant landholdings:

An ill-defined and chaotic colonial pattern of land use and tenure . . . persuaded the coffee planters that major reforms were necessary. That these reforms led to a rapid and dramatic transformation of the entire agrarian structure may be attributed to the complete authority of a small oligarchy in whose interests the changes were made, which, freed from colonial restraints, viewed the nation's land and people as resources to be used for its own benefit.⁸

For Browning, as well as other scholars, the transformation of community and municipal landholding patterns was carried out by a small oligarchic elite who controlled state policy.⁹

As a result, discussions of Salvadoran history consistently emphasize how authoritarian politics have determined the fate of the peasantry and land tenure, and how coffee exports served as the elite's battering ram against the peasantry. The arguments presented here question these assumptions¹⁰ and attempt to move Salvadoran historiography away from a rigid economic determinism. The impact on peasants of increasing

agro-export production, the emergence of powerful landholding elites, and the rise of increasingly centralized liberal states was not determined simply by economic relations or land tenure patterns. The political position of the peasantry, filtered through myriad local, regional, and national structures, also helped to determine peasant initiatives and responses to the various transformations of the 1820–1930 period. Local power relations—to which peasants were inextricably connected—influenced the structure of land tenure, class formation, and the national state.

This book argues that in the nineteenth century Salvadoran peasants had secure access to land and commercial networks. A weak state, dependent on local power bases and always vulnerable to invasion from other Central American states, and the autonomous role of peasants and their communities gave the peasant economy a certain strength and enabled peasants to participate in commercial and export markets.¹¹ While they never “seized” the central state, peasants established significant limits and conditions on the actions of other social sectors and the state over questions of power and production. These legacies, fought over for much of the nineteenth century, gave peasants great autonomy—a fact that historians of Latin America are only beginning to research. The result of this legacy is that the transformation of landownership encouraged by liberals and the state took place in a context that provided significant opportunities for peasant landownership and commercial production.

This book reconstructs the agrarian social history of El Salvador in the nineteenth century, especially the western and central regions. Using local archival materials, it traces the formation of a heterogeneous peasantry out of the complex interaction of colonial legacies, peasant practices, and state policies. It focuses on the development of peasant and communal organizations, agriculture, and land use patterns. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the growth of export agriculture and the privatization of land in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not inevitably lead to the immediate expropriation and proletarianization of peasant producers. Instead, these changes created a differentiated class of peasants and small-scale farmers. While the expansion of exports like indigo and coffee revolutionized important aspects of local society, they did not destroy the nation’s peasantry. In fact, the clearest result of so-called liberal reforms was the institutionalization of a differentiated,

ethnically polarized, freeholding peasantry rather than a transition to a “proletarian” agrarian capitalism.

Despite the importance of new social processes linked to coffee, local agrarian society in most regions retained a degree of continuity with previous patterns. Peasants retained considerable autonomy in relation to other social sectors, as they struggled with, resisted, adapted to, and participated in changing conditions, including the expansion of coffee production. Established social structures provided a framework for coping with the new social relations that began to emerge after the 1870s when coffee became a significant export product. Furthermore, Salvadoran peasants participated in the formation of the nation-state. Peasant communities and peasant-based factions played an important role in local and “national” political struggles—as citizens, insurgents, and soldiers. But this participation developed strong limitations as the century advanced and the administrative and military capacities of the national state expanded, although not in a linear fashion.

El Salvador’s Agrarian Society, ca. 1920

Salvadoran history has often been contrasted with that of Costa Rica. For modern-day observers, the divergence could not be more clear: while Costa Rica has experienced stable, electoral rule and the abolition of its military since 1948, El Salvador remained under military influence for decades, and only after the negotiated settlement of a protracted revolutionary war involving extensive U.S. intervention did it make a transition to civilian rule and stable electoral politics.¹² Similarly, contemporary El Salvador’s striking class differences stand in contrast to Costa Rica’s less polarized social structure and its social welfare policies.¹³ Despite recent reconsiderations and refinements, the predominant view sees the character of Costa Rica’s expansion of coffee production, and the associated structures and struggles, as one basis for the development of a more egalitarian and democratic society within a modern welfare state.¹⁴ On the other hand, most observers of El Salvador, with its ethnic divisions, scarce land, and successful elite, focus on the concentration of land in few hands and the violent domination of authori-

tarian regimes over Salvadoran workers and peasants. Bradford Burns, for example, posits a dramatic contrast between the egalitarian (“leisurely”) society of midcentury that produced for the world markets and the plantation-based, oligarchic, export-oriented, coffee-based, authoritarian Salvador of the 1890s—thus pushing back the changes of the 1920s and 1930s by four decades.¹⁵

This book argues against such simplistic contrasts. In fact, in some important respects El Salvador’s history before the 1920s resembles aspects of the Costa Rican experience.¹⁶ We must reexamine the assumptions built into prevailing interpretations of Salvadoran history. This study is motivated by various important questions connected to El Salvador’s twentieth-century history. First, how can one explain the successes of the revolutionary movement of the 1980s? By 1983 the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) controlled vast extensions of El Salvador’s national territory.¹⁷ The FMLN’s success in holding onto much of the northern and eastern parts of the country cannot be attributed only to the tactical failures of Salvadoran armed forces in dislodging guerrillas from mountainous terrain. Instead, the FMLN clearly developed strong and enduring bases of peasant support in these regions of isolated, neglected, and impoverished peasant agriculture.¹⁸ Decades of poverty and neglect by the central state since the 1950s contributed to the peasants’ support, especially in regions with a long tradition of peasant access to land that had survived (if marginally) the dramatic agrarian changes of 1950–1979. The FMLN’s success in recruiting peasants went far beyond the foundations laid by pre-1980 popular organizations.¹⁹ In all regions, the effects of post–World War II economic growth on peasants and rural laborers have been crucial to political and social mobilization. Regional differences in the ability of the FMLN to mobilize support raise questions about the local history of class and ethnic relations in El Salvador that this book hopes to begin to answer.

Other questions also emerge from an examination of export production and land use patterns in the first decades of the twentieth century. Historians have assigned a disproportionate role to coffee production, given the actual use of land and labor. The role of coffee has been exaggerated in a teleology shared by perspectives of both left and right: all that was good—or bad—came from the crop, and there was no national

history or nation without it. This emphasis obscures the social history of El Salvador's peasants, buried beneath the timeless power of elites and the exploitation of landless wage workers. Yet even a cursory examination of the 1950 agricultural census reveals important pockets of peasant and small-scale agriculture throughout the country, as well as a significant rural middle sector.²⁰ This raises further questions about the origins of the coffee economy and its impact on the larger society. Could a crop that occupied no more than 40,000 hectares at the turn of the century so clearly have dictated the history of the country's peasantry?

These questions are further fueled by a reading of travel narratives and other descriptions of early twentieth-century El Salvador. Despite their often sweeping generalizations, these accounts present an image of El Salvador very different from the stark polarized scenario reproduced in most depictions of the country. They reflect a surprising consensus that the peasantry and other small-scale producers were an important component of the country's social structure well into the 1920s.²¹ One source observed that in El Salvador "the standard of living among the laboring classes is considerably higher than in Guatemala and Nicaragua."²² In 1910 Dana Munro noticed "plot after plot of coffee grounds as large as village squares, each owned and worked by some peasant proprietor" and argued that the Salvadoran peasants and workers "had never suffered from the rapacity of large landholders."²³ Munro correctly concluded that most of the country's rural residents "earned their livelihood from the cultivation of export crops and from wages, rather than from subsistence agriculture alone."²⁴ Wallace Thompson wrote in 1924, "Most of the work of El Salvador is done by its independent farmers in their time off."²⁵ Similarly, Karl Sapper found that "in El Salvador, generally, the small rural property [owner] no longer is always able to produce enough to feed his family. Nevertheless and in spite of differences in detail, the much more equitable division of property results in there being few people without their own land."²⁶ In 1897 Alexandre Lambert de Sainte-Croix, who observed the peasantry after the privatization of common lands, found an extensive division of property within the coffee economy and even among the Salvadoran elite when compared to Mexico and Guatemala.²⁷ In 1916, Gulian Lansing Morrill, while contemptuous of Salvadoran poverty, noted that

“the peonage or slave system as one finds in Guatemala or Mexico is unknown. The feudal land system isn’t fashionable and the people are larger real estate owners than in other Central American countries.”²⁸ Similarly, in 1924 Thompson found that together with clear class distinctions,

these are the farms, large and small (the numbers of tiny patches prove how many are the individual farms) where food are grown to supply the coffee plantations and for export. . . . The coffee country . . . there, too, there will be many individual properties, for the Salvadoreans are happy in the bits of land that they come to own. . . . The lower classes are apparently well able, also, to take care of themselves in small business, and the percentage of small holdings and tiny coffee “estates” is as high, almost, as in Costa Rica. It is estimated that 75 percent of the coffee of Salvador is raised on properties held by small landowners of the low and lower middle classes. . . . The bulk of the labor of the picking season, however, comes from the small landowners and their families. These independent Salvadoreans, if they are coffee raisers, finish their own picking first, and then go, with their wives and children, to work on one of the big *fincas* near at hand. . . . There they join the volunteers who have come out from the town, and also, another class like themselves, small farmers who raise other crops than coffee, but who come in to work on the *fincas* through the picking season. . . . Land is the most approved investment of the upper classes, and in every rank of the lower classes the same instinct appears.²⁹

These passages reveal the importance of the Salvadoran peasantry and small producers even within conceptions that emphasize the export economy.

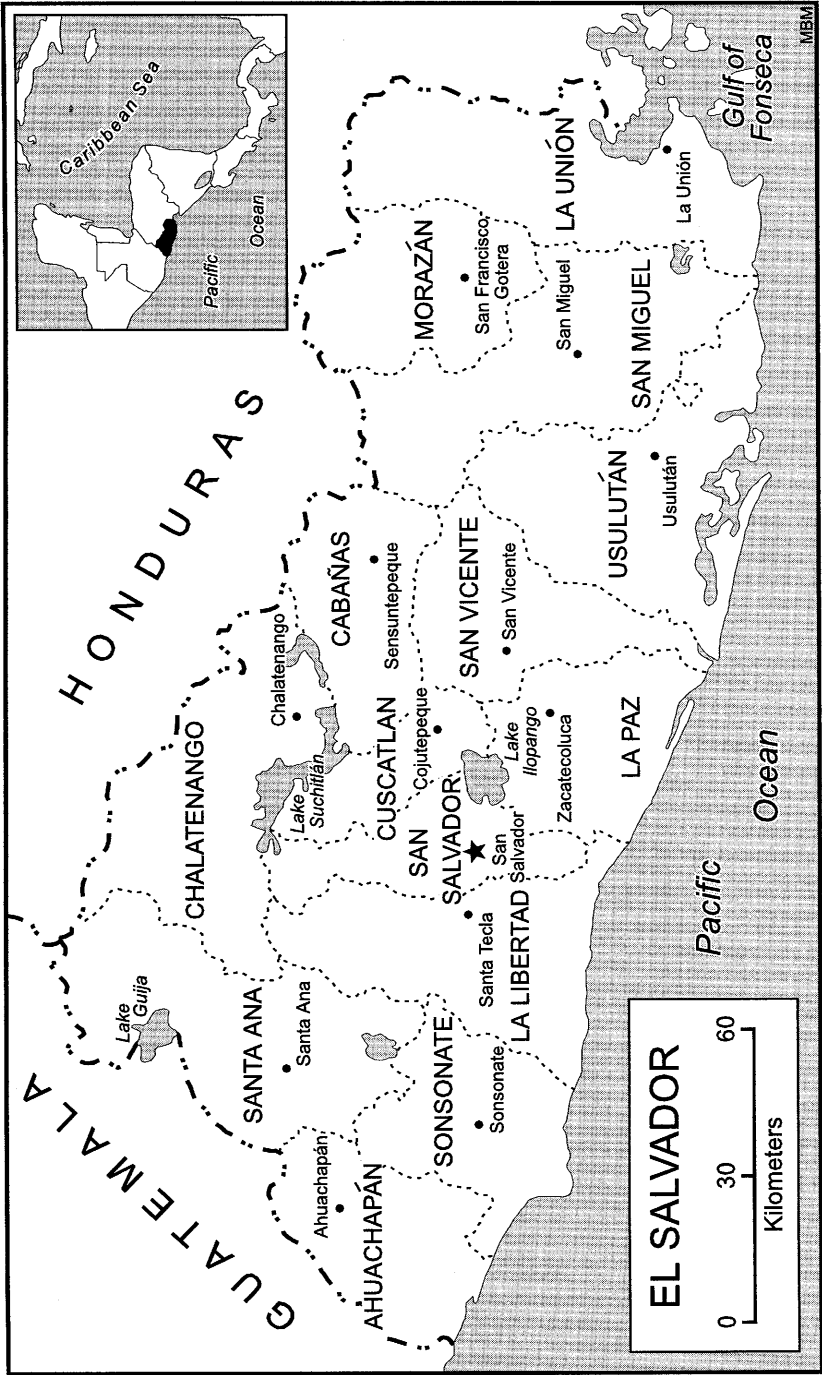
Harry Latourette Foster provides further confirmation. In 1925 he wrote, “Salvador . . . is mainly a coffee country. It is not, however, a country of large estates but of small holdings.”³⁰ In 1917 William Henry Koebel commented, “On the whole . . . the holdings are small, being devoted to such products as coffee, sugar, and tobacco. The country, in fact, is largely one of peasant proprietors.”³¹ Even an official 1924 government report, probably compiled by Pedro Fonseca, head of the National Statistics Office, reads: “As in our country wealth is very fractioned, production generally satisfies demand, and the average eco-

conomic standard is higher than in many countries in America.” Other observers noted that despite the presence of a few very large coffee producers “the number of small producers is large.”³² For Frank G. Carpenter, El Salvador was “one big farm, with all its people at work, and no land wasted. Practically every man owns a little piece of property, or else has a good home upon one of the many large plantations. Even the poorest have something to lose in case of a revolution, and hence all are peaceful[ly] inclined.”³³ Manfredo Vanni, a more sophisticated observer, provides a more detailed assessment of the land tenure situation in the mid-1920s by estimating that around half of all Salvadoran households owned land.³⁴ While these assertions need not convince us entirely, they do suggest the significance and extent of peasant landownership in El Salvador and provide a set of guiding questions for this study.³⁵

Region and Geography in El Salvador

El Salvador is a land of physical and ecological contrasts. (See map 1.) Its relatively small land area includes a multitude of volcanoes, interior elevated plains, coastal lowlands, and coastal and interior mountain ranges and hills of volcanic origin. Volcanic activity provided El Salvador with highly fertile soil. The country contains only one large river, the Lempa, which winds through a dry interior basin before emptying into the Pacific. The alluvial coastal plains are also fertile. While there are many peaks of a few thousand feet, elevation of most of the terrain is below 3,000 feet.

There are two common ways of dividing El Salvador into regions. Dividing it into three north-to-south strips is to stress historical over geographical factors. A second mode, which emphasizes natural features of the landscape, is to divide it into three east-to-west strips separated by mountain ranges.³⁶ The northern strip, mountainous, arid, and rugged, runs along most of the border with Honduras; the center strip contains mountains and settled valleys, including most urban centers and a large share of the population; the southern coastal plains, valleys, and mountain ranges have until recently been less populated. This study uses both



Map 1. El Salvador

perspectives; integrating the ecological variations of the horizontal perspective with the politico-historical variations implied in the vertical is a more useful approach to the diverse landscapes and local histories of El Salvador.

Organization of the Book

The following chapters focus on the position of the peasantry and small-scale producers in relation to the formation of elite sectors, the state, and the local and national commercial economies. They also provide a framework for future study of El Salvador's regional history that incorporates both the peasantry and the complex story of peasant-elite relations. Chapter 2 examines late colonial landholding patterns, the social structures associated with the production of indigo in this period, and the impositions of the colonial state.³⁷ It emphasizes the role of small producers and demographic, ethnic, and economic trends. The colonial period left El Salvador three great legacies. It saw the founding of the haciendas, the establishment and expansion of collectively owned lands for both Indian and Ladino communities, and the beginnings of commercial production of sugar, cacao, indigo, cattle, and other products by both peasants and haciendas.

El Salvador's most important characteristics began to emerge in the eighteenth century: the urban centers of Sonsonate and San Salvador were extensively commercialized; community ownership became an important feature of land tenure; the population was ethnically heterogeneous;³⁸ and large areas of land were privately owned. By the end of the colonial era, El Salvador was Central America's most thoroughly commercialized region, although its commerce was firmly based in peasant forms of production and landholding.³⁹

Chapter 3 examines community and hacienda landholding after independence. It reviews national and local land legislation and the effects of politics on land-related issues. It reviews the history of El Salvador's Indian and Ladino communities, municipal landholdings, and internal frontier settlement (which often extended colonial-era forms of common land use). Salvadoran peasants with land could both raise their own crops and produce for the market. In the nineteenth century, com-

munity-controlled and municipal land use became more complex. This legacy of strong municipal and community land use, given a relatively weak hacienda sector and expanding commercial agriculture, facilitated the production and export of grains, sugar, indigo, coffee, and other products, especially after the 1850s.

Chapter 4 discusses local economy and society between the 1830s and the 1880s. El Salvador was unusual among the republics that emerged from the Captain Generalcy of Guatemala in combining an extensively commercialized economy with widely distributed trade networks. In addition to producing indigo and raising animals for export, El Salvador added other products in the nineteenth century—silver, coffee, rice, sugar, liquor, tobacco, cigars, and crafts. Internally, El Salvador developed complex and extensive trade networks that became visible in the many commercial fairs and peasant markets. In the fifty years after independence, hacienda-based agriculture and landowning declined in significance, while peasant landholding, production, and commercial involvement increased. Community and village structures sustained the relative prosperity of the peasantry even as social and economic differentiation emerged. In the west, both Ladinos and Indians participated in the commercial economy, but Indians were more likely to become Ladinos if they left home to seek work and opportunity elsewhere. The expansion of regional and export commercial activities in the late 1850s spurred the creation of new sectors of successful farmer-entrepreneurs based on municipal and community lands.

Chapter 5 considers the peasants' role in the political struggles between the 1820s and the 1890s. After independence from Spain and a brief period in which Mexico attempted to annex the region, El Salvador embarked on a long and conflict-ridden process of state formation. Before the emergence of an effective central state with power to implement and enforce laws, a decentralized polity prevailed in which peasant communities, autonomous municipal governments, military strongmen, neighboring states, and weak state institutions were locked in protracted conflicts and unstable alliances. During these tumultuous decades, peasants, artisans, and communities mobilized in various ways, while local and national politics became connected as military caudillos sought alliances with local social forces. Even attempts to de-

fend lands by Indian communities, for example, were related to larger regional, national, and even isthmian political factionalism. An effective national state did not begin to emerge until the 1880s, when export revenues, telegraph service, railroads, a professional military, and foreign pressures slowly brought a measure of stability.

Coffee production is the subject of chapter 6. After the 1850s, coffee was a viable product because it complemented existing commercial activities. Its labor demands were compatible with raising sugar, indigo, and subsistence products, and because it could be grown on previously unused high-elevation forested areas, it did not displace other crops or change landholding patterns. Raising coffee for export supplemented other sources of income for peasants and for larger entrepreneurs, who ultimately benefited most. While coffee was important in the formation of a national elite and as part of the nation's economic development, it did not displace peasant agriculture nor suddenly revolutionize land tenure.

Chapter 7 looks at how communities and municipalities began the partitioning and titling of both possessed and unpossessed lands. After the 1870s, because of population growth and increased commercial farming, tenants wished to own the land they tilled. Legislators from the western coffee region backed laws to privatize community and municipal-owned farms. Thousands of peasants, farmers, and urban investors were able to own their farms, and even to claim unused lands. The privatization of common lands also encouraged the privatization of state-owned *baldíos* (unclaimed lands).

Chapter 8 examines how the protracted partition of community lands weakened ethnic communities and caused the dispersal (even loss) of once-collective resources. This process could take many years and caused many conflicts. Ethnic tensions were heightened as Indian communities clashed with local Ladinos over partitioning. However, conflicts did not necessarily follow ethnic lines, even in localities with significant Ladino and Indian populations, but reflected divisions based on emerging class differences or political alliances within the communities.

Chapter 9 concludes with a survey of the changes in landownership, labor, and how the formation of a peasantry with limited access to land

set the stage for the dramatic events of the 1920s and early 1930s. In this period the consolidation of political and economic elites and rural middle sectors established limits to the peasantry's ability to reproduce itself, and a landless rural sector began to emerge. These conditions created the foundations for new politics that relied on clientelistic cross-class alliances mediated by a paternalistic state. This political system that combined liberal and authoritarian elements collapsed with the crisis of the agro-export economy in 1929, contributing to the revolt of 1932 and the reemergence and complete institutionalization of military control over the state.



2 Peasants, Indigo, and Land in the Late Colonial Period

During the late colonial period, both subsistence and commercial agriculture expanded in the two provinces that later united to form the State of El Salvador. The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the steady rise of indigo production and export, as well as related economic activities. Indigo, a blue dye used in textile manufacturing in Europe and the Andes, could be produced and processed by both small and large growers. The colonial-era provinces of San Salvador and Sonsonate became production centers, while the merchants of Guatemala City, and to a lesser extent San Vicente, San Miguel, and San Salvador, controlled most of the financing and marketing of the crop. An important part of the Salvadoran colonial legacy was a strong and heterogeneous peasantry of both Ladinos and Indians deeply connected to these commercial activities but at the same time protective of local political autonomy and resources.

Indigo, Peasants, and Estates in the Eighteenth Century

Indigo, cattle raising, and other commercial activities encouraged a limited economic expansion in the region, with peasants and communal

producers becoming important participants. The term *peasant* refers to small-scale, mostly agricultural producers who grow their own crops but do not necessarily produce for the market. Peasants do not hire others, but instead depend on their own family or community members to work with them. They can be tenants, sharecroppers, owners of land, squatters, or claimants to untitled land. As used here, the term rarely implies a directly subordinate position in relation to a landholding elite or the state.¹

Indigo production left El Salvador two important legacies. First, it stimulated the formation of haciendas. These estates, most of them undercapitalized and not fully cultivated, created an enduring social structure whose impact would be felt into the twentieth century. Second, a market economy based on indigo, cattle, grain, and other products initiated a pattern of peasant access and titling of lands and the mobilization of community and family resources for commercial production.²

Indigo and other commercial products gave peasants important opportunities, especially the expanding group of Ladinos. Whereas Indians were usually identified by their membership in pueblos or communities that dated back to the early colonial era, Ladinos were Indians who had left their native communities and had taken on the dress or language of Spaniards, or simply abandoned their ethnic identity. The term can also mean *mestizo* or mulatto, as many Ladinos were products of unions between Indians and whites or Africans. By the nineteenth century, *Ladino* was more of an oppositional category—anyone not identified as white or Indian—although Ladinos could develop as formal an ethnic consciousness as Indians, especially as members of a landholding community. Ladinos made up about half of the Salvadoran population by the late eighteenth century.

Indigo production gave peasants a certain autonomy, whether they worked communal lands or their own, and limited the expansion of the estates by reducing the labor pool. These changes also affected Indian communities and peasants not involved directly in the indigo trade. Many Indian communities expanded economically and demographically during this period and gained in material well-being and autonomy—gains that were consolidated in the 1830–1880 period.

Indigo production and export in Central America had expanded greatly in the 1600s, supplanting cacao as the principal export, but declined toward the end of the century. The boom that began in the 1730s

marked the beginning of an important economic and social change. Indigo brought profits to *hacendados* and small producers, tax revenues to the royal coffers, and cash income to Indian and Ladino laborers. At least half, perhaps two-thirds, of the indigo produced in colonial Central America during the eighteenth century came from small Ladino and Indian growers,³ and 90 percent of the crop was grown and processed in the province of San Salvador.⁴ The implications of this legacy, however, have not been well enough related to the development of the Salvadoran peasantry.⁵

Expanded indigo production encouraged the establishment of haciendas that also raised food and cattle, but small producers and Indian communities also responded to new demand for indigo. (The same applies to the colonial-era cattle trade, which was probably as important as indigo to the Indians.) The town of Chalchuapa in the modern department of Santa Ana, then mostly Indian, illustrates the links between the expanding indigo economy and other sectors. As a center for raising and selling livestock, Chalchuapa's cattle farmers provided food for hacienda laborers and skins for packaging the indigo.⁶ As a result, many western and south-central towns, many controlled by Indian communities, specialized in small-scale cattle raising, a legacy that continued until the late nineteenth century.

In the eighteenth century, there was little competition for land except where dense peasant settlement coincided with estate expansion, such as around the cities of San Salvador and San Miguel.⁷ In most other areas, especially where Indian communities did not title lands beyond the areas they occupied, extensive free lands were available throughout the century; the only limitation to their use was access to mule paths and roads.

Some successful large landowners and indigo producers began as tenants of Indian communities and eventually purchased or gained permanent control of their lands.⁸ However, there were no economies of scale in indigo production, which permitted small producers to compete successfully in both producing and processing the dye. (Land dedicated to the indigo-producing weed for three months could be planted with corn the rest of the year.)⁹ Their numbers increased over the century. Travelers who visited the region noted the growing of indigo "at every small settlement" across the province.¹⁰ Observers estimated that between one-third to one-half of the crop was produced by *poquiteros* (smallholders). The

more conservative estimate of one-third implies that at the height of colonial indigo production there were around 3,000 small-scale producers with an annual output of about 100 pounds. This figure is consistent with other data on the size of peasant *ejidos* (common lands held by municipalities) and communal holdings.

In 1768 Cortés y Larraz, bishop of Guatemala, who visited most towns in the region, commented on the large number of indigo and cattle haciendas, almost twice the number found in 1740. Of 540 haciendas, he found that about two-thirds grew indigo. But his description, together with other evidence, indicates that few could properly be called haciendas, given their size and the scale of their activities.¹¹ Ulloa, a colonial intendant who reported on the state of the province, also found haciendas to be small; frequently, the holdings of peasant Indian and Ladino communities and towns were larger.

The lack of an extensive internal market and a large economic motor such as silver mining or large-scale commercial agriculture, found elsewhere in Latin America, meant that most Spanish landholders in El Salvador were relatively poor, with little capital to invest; many were priests.¹² The lack of large-scale elite-controlled economic activity meant that these farmers lived most of the year on their lands outside the principal Spanish towns—Salvador, Santa Ana, San Vicente, Zacatecoluca, Sonsonate, and San Miguel. The decline in the revenue-producing Indian population limited the Spaniards' ability to accumulate wealth, especially after the decline of cacao production. What revenues they received from cattle, indigo, and sugar went to pay scarce and expensive laborers, high transport costs, and—more important—the merchant elite of Guatemala City, who controlled the export of the dye and imports of important products.¹³ Many were actually quite impoverished, enjoying elite status only in relation to local standards.

A report prepared by the Real Consulado de Comercio de Guatemala (Merchants' Guild of Guatemala) for Antonio Larrazábal, deputy to the Spanish Cortes in 1811, described the poverty of the kingdom's *hacendados*: "Despite the vast lands that their haciendas include, in reality they are poor, because beside that their possessions have debts to the church [*capellanías*], mortgages, and other encumbrances on them that are equivalent to their value; . . . they must go into debt to be able to work as they are accustomed to, rarely achieving the relief that happiness and well-

being brings to man.”¹⁴ The largest and most productive estates were owned by Guatemala City merchants themselves—often after taking them over from indebted local proprietors. The Aycinena family, for example, owned some of the largest haciendas in the districts of Zacatecoluca and San Vicente. In addition, Ladino settlers from other provinces also held titled possessions and gained the status of local notables by serving in the militia, one of the few avenues for advancement outside of agriculture and manufacturing. Their farms, however, were never very productive, even if they covered large areas.

The income from indigo production, however, enabled hundreds of small producers, most of whom did not hire laborers but relied on family and community members, to acquire land and produce for the local market.¹⁵ While 10 percent of indigo producers made tax payments, indicating the predominance of smaller farmers, few peasant producers appear in official records for a number of reasons. Many sold their crop unprocessed to larger producers who operated their own processing facilities (*obrajes*) and had access to the marketing networks required to export the dye.¹⁶ In addition, it was easier for small producers to process and market their crops illegally without registering them with local authorities, thus avoiding taxes.¹⁷

The size of indigo producers varied significantly from one region to another. Most indigo haciendas were established around the cities of San Salvador, San Vicente, Zacatecoluca, and San Miguel. There were more than 200 *obrajes* surrounding San Salvador, and more near San Miguel.¹⁸ Smaller producers tended to predominate in areas around Chalatenango, Tejutla, Sensuntepeque, and Santa Ana. Indigo was grown, however, in most populated areas. The regional and size breakdown of tithe payments (table 2.1) indicates the distribution of production, which reflected important demographic changes between 1740 and 1807.

As the Ladino population expanded and new areas on the borders of existing pueblos were colonized, new zones of indigo production were brought into cultivation by Ladino peasants. The regions of expanding indigo production before independence (San Miguel, Chalatenango, Cabañas, San Vicente) were also the regions of greatest demographic growth. (See appendix.) Among the principal regions of peasant indigo production were the northern districts of Chalatenango and Tejutla. Successful peasants and their communities were able to extend their titled

Table 2.1 Tithe Payments by Indigo Producers in 1804

	<i>Small (<10)</i>		<i>Medium (11-100)</i>		<i>Large (100+)</i>	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Tejutla (Ch)						
Tithe payers	83	(88)	11	(12)	0	(0)
Lbs. of tithe	263	(50)	279	(50)	0	(0)
Suchitoto (Ca)						
Tithe payers	32	(55)	24	(41)	2	(4)
Lbs. of tithe	176	(18)	534	(54)	272	(28)
San Salvador (SS)						
Tithe payers	4	(22)	10	(56)	4	(22)
Lbs. of tithe	28	(3)	389	(38)	607	(60)
San Vicente (SV)						
Tithe payers	4	(16)	11	(44)	11	(44)
Lbs. of tithe	25	(1)	450	(19)	1,922	(79)
Zacatecoluca (LP)						
Tithe payers	0	(0)	2	(25)	6	(75)
Lbs. of tithe	0	(0)	151	(8)	1,815	(91)

Sources: Wortman, *Government and Society*; Rubio, *Historía del añil*.

lands to hundreds of *caballerías*. (A *caballería* was about 45 hectares.) Ladino peasant communities that called themselves workers' brotherhoods (*hermandades de labradores*) obtained title to very extensive lands in 1779, 1780, and 1782.¹⁹

Although the region had some medium-sized producers and a few haciendas, most of the crop was grown by peasants working communal lands.²⁰ The *Apuntamientos*—reports by the Central American representative to the Spanish Cortes of 1811—described the 12,500 residents of Tejutla and Chalatenango, “the majority of whom are owners of small plots,” as the most productive farmers in the kingdom, who despite the sterility and dryness of their lands outproduced all the haciendas, usually raising 150,000 pounds of indigo annually and over 225,000 in 1806.²¹ Gutiérrez in 1807 listed the many hamlets in these districts and pointed to their specialization in indigo. This is not surprising, given that most

towns, especially in the east and north, had no manufacturing or other nonagricultural enterprises.

Small producers often rented lands from *hacendados* or other landowners, but the proportion of people living on haciendas has been exaggerated. Browning relied on Cortés y Larraz's estimate of 25–30 percent, but a more accurate (although incomplete) census of 1803, probably used by Gutiérrez in his report, states that in the entire Capitanía General of Central America, 13 percent of adult males were tenants. Gutiérrez himself reported 3,100 sharecroppers out of an adult male population of 58,000, that is, 5 percent.²² Furthermore, as indicated by Cortés y Larraz's choice of the term *poblador* (settler) and other evidence, most hacienda residents were actually squatters who lived on haciendas but had no direct economic relationship with the owners. Others were tenants who paid a *terraje* (land-use) fee in cash or kind, but who usually did not provide labor services. Unlike the haciendas in other regions of colonial Spanish America, few had resident tenant workers who labored on the estate's productive enterprises.

Although indigo was not a very labor-intensive crop to grow, processing the plant did require significant labor during the eight-to-twelve-week season.²³ While Ladinos and Indians were increasing in population, large growers had difficulty getting field workers until new legislative policy imposed a labor tax on Indian communities in 1784. Although this law was constantly violated, the fact that growers had to resort to pressure to recruit workers indicates the autonomy of Indian communities when compared to other regions of Spanish America.²⁴ Wages were high and usually involved a large advance payment. The 1784 labor tax led to the recruitment of part of the adult male Indian population, who went to work on the farms and estates to fulfill their village quotas.

The 1784 labor legislation ordered the establishment of a town roster of one-fourth of a village's adult male population. According to a 1785 report, 3,280 Indian laborers from the provinces of San Salvador and Sonsonate worked on local estates. Another source estimated the male, tax-paying Indian population of Sonsonate and San Salvador at around 17,000.²⁵ Thus about 20 percent of all Indian men spent up to three months working on the 75 haciendas in the region (out of 400) that took advantage of the labor tax on Indian and Ladino communities. While only a handful of estates employed more than 100 workers, most were